

Introduction

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A city is a difficult and unwieldy thing to define. What Chicago actually is as a city, what its special perfume is, and what lies at its inner core is, at best, elusive stuff. But the difficulty of the task has not prevented many within and without this city from attempting to define Chicago, and to identify those trace components that are peculiarly unique to this peculiar place. And those definitions and descriptions have elements in common. They invariably identify Chicago as a competitive, aggressive, and argumentative place, as hog-butcher with big shoulders, bastion of middle-class no-nonsense values, right-thinking bread and butter America.

And those pundits also invariably speak of Chicago as a contentious us-against-them and us-against-each-other place, a city of fierce rivalries carefully nurtured and cultivated over the years until what often comes to define this city and its inhabitants is their real or perceived antagonists. It's Cub fans vs. Sox fans, it's North side vs. South side, it's *Sun-Times* vs. *Tribune*, it's racial polarities and deep-seated ethnic divisions raised in local politics to Byzantine standards, it's city vs. suburbs and downstate, it's the Loop vs. the neighborhoods, it's on, and on, and on, and on, the quickened pace of megalopolis conflict, the particular motivational currency of Chicago's urban existence.

And, of course, in the self-inflicted chip-on-the-shoulder tag of The Second City, it's the never-ending, rarely abated death struggle with the metropolis to the East, and with the intellectual, moral, and cultural values believed to rest there. This climate of friction and fraction, this sometimes bunker mentality, is part of Chicago's art world too, and has set the tone for much of local art history. Again, real or perceived, it's been Imagists vs. Abstractionists, Neo-Expressionists vs. Cool Conceptualists, it's been generational warfare, it's been one magazine or one museum against another, it's been alternative galleries snapping at each other's heels, it's been artists criticizing dealers who criticize collectors who criticize curators who criticize art historians who criticize art schools who criticize critics who criticize artists.

This air of competition, jostling for position, and urge toward definition by negation has led to the particular qualities of Chicago art. Steeled in the crucible of confrontation, artists in Chicago are required to discover and defend their personal esthetic vision and to be alert to assessing their shifting roles over the course of their careers. In an odd but wonderful way, local infighting can be seen to have accelerated artistic output, functioning as a rarifying impetus toward idiosyncratic pursuits.

And those institutions of higher education where art is taught in Chicago play no small role in this process. They are the hotbeds of Chicago art, the laboratories where styles and loyalties are forged and reinforced. Academic pride and curiosity has led each school to be conscious of and interested in each other's activities. And each school has developed some special cachet or reinforced some historical legacy to define and focus their art departments.

In the case of The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), many factors have brought its art department to this place and time. At its origins at Navy Pier in 1947, UIC's art department was marked by an influx of faculty trained at the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). The principles emphasized at IIT, derived from its Bauhaus forebears, included a concentration on an intense and rigorous faculty/student interaction, and a slight predilection for non-representational art with a systemic and/or intellectual focus. These principles have broadly continued to characterize UIC long after their move to their present campus in 1965. All Studio Arts faculty members, in addition to their courses in their respective disciplines, teach an upper level seminar concerned with issues in contemporary art. And each session, graduate students are involved in the Seminar in Contemporary Art Theory, which is taught by a guest visiting professor of local or national repute — in recent years these have included Dennis Adrian, Mary Beth Edelson, Douglas Davis, Deven Golden, Judith Russi Kirshner, Donald Kuspit, Lewis Manilow, Charlotte Moser, Peter Taub, Sue Taylor, Alice Thorson, and Marcia Tucker. And too, at UIC there is an emphasis on frequent studio critiques, where students are trained to be articulate about their work and informed about their milieu.

The School of Art and Design at UIC is a conglomerate of five separate departments. Besides Studio Arts, it oversees the curriculum of Communication Design, Industrial Design, the program in Photo/Film/Video/Electronic Visualization, and the Graduate program in Art Therapy. Its average of 700 undergraduate and graduate majors makes it among the two or three largest institutions of art education in Illinois, and it is the largest public university offering degrees in art in Chicago.

The Studio Arts faculty is and has always been at the forefront of the program of education presented at UIC. With reputations that have reached local, national, and international proportions — over the past two years alone, the art of individual UIC faculty has been on display in eighteen states and nine foreign countries—these current twelve members follow in the traditions set by former colleagues such as Roland Ginzel, Robert Nickle, Martin Puryear, and Dan Ramirez. While the breadth of the current faculty makes it excessive to argue that a single stylistic thread runs through this department, it is not too much to note that these artists are linked by their commitment to the very highest standards as art professionals and as teachers.

For most of the past decade Morris Barazani has been painting his ruminations on the landscape of southern Wisconsin. His painterly canvases are lyrical, open-handed, and reflect a kind of pictorial equanimity that one suspects is nonetheless hard won. The equipoise shown here, the balance of form and color and light and volume bespeaks the fruits of a long and experienced vision. Barazani's pictures transcend his chosen motifs. What begins as a vista of nature soon becomes a dappling pattern of paint, a controlled celebration of medium that, while motivated by the outer world, finds resolution only in the world of art.

The recent small handpainted books of Leon Bellin are the painterly and evocative descendants of his several decades of interest in handmade books. While earlier he employed linoleum cuts or silkscreens to make multiple editions, Bellin now revels in the tactile immediacy of watercolor to create these unique and rather lush outpourings. These are revels indeed, sometimes composed of Bacchic friezes of sensual abandon, exposing their private language in a direct and fecund way. Imagery comes in streams, as page follows page in inexorable rhythm, loosed in some fanciful dance of an almost premythic state of being.

There is so much at stake in Phyllis Bramson's pictures that it becomes amazing that frames can contain them. For most of her career Bramson was concerned with depicting men and women struggling with the heavy burdens of love. Her charged and frenetic figures cavorted and gyrated in contorted topsy-turvy spaces, attempting to find a moment of union, a respite from isolation, urged toward a consummation they never quite achieved. Recently her concerns have expanded to themes with broader social and global implications, and these too are realized in her signature crowded, multi-incident images. These are urgent messages, Cassandra-like warnings of tragedies we may not be able to avoid.

Rodney Carswell's abstract paintings have an extraordinarily seductive impact. But these carefully crafted and scrupulously orchestrated objects contain unexpected elements we do not at first perceive, surprises that alter and deny our first expectations. His vocabulary of squares, circles, crosses, and rectangles is realized in rich oil and wax paint, creating lustrous and tactile surfaces. But there is causal dysfunction here; Carswell's circles get broken, his crosses are slightly akimbo, lines don't quite meet, color sequences refuse to follow pattern or program, and squares and rectangles do little shifts forward and back into space. Carswell's slight, and anything but illogical, permutations prod us to hyperawareness and give his work superb tension and energy.

The paintings of Julia Fish do not function as visual haiku, but they seem to share some of that art form's sense of distillation and act as incredibly refined and poetic gestures. Nature is not an emptied cliché in Fish's work, but a parallel site of drama, a place wherein human emotions and values find themselves poignantly replicated. She spins a seductive web of subtle urges, the very act of artmaking one more ritual hermetically performed, one more quiet token of

human presence. Landscape extrapolates in and out of itself, revealing its essence, displaying its potential for spiritual construct. Fish's art is the ice that burns.

Klindt Houlberg's recent sculptures are both a continuation and an expansion of his esthetic. Still a major presence is what can only be called consummate craftsmanship—Houlberg's understanding of the possibilities in the medium of wood, his respect for its integral nature, and his skill in permuting that nature to his will continues to be exemplary. But coupled now with that is an intensification of iconography, creating sculptures and/or furniture ensembles that are redolent with personal drama of a very complex and multileveled sort. His sculptures now are totems in which matter of deepest import plays itself out in objects which successfully juggle delight and despair.

Martin Hurtig's art is an inquiry into the edges of the pure and abstract glories that can lie within systemic thinking. His art is a procedure that can be no procedure, a logic that often turns in on itself, a sequencing that, while not arbitrary, is subject to odd turns and interesting results. Hurtig's shapes can literally unfold, or better yet, refold, in an origami-like way, revealing a core structure, a first decision that set the whole apparatus in motion. This art senses the depth of meaning that can lie in random choice, and plumbs the strictures that about the activities of thought and act.

Linda King's recent paintings and prints have concentrated on trees, but rarely focus on trunks or branches. Rather, her vibrant and turbulent images seek the arboreal crisis point, that spot where trunk ends and branches begin, that point where vertical shaft seeks to explode into a spray of life. The outcome of this crisis is in doubt in King's images, as winter seems her chosen season; stripped of leaves, her trees confront us with the possibility of stasis, of life delayed or denied. This seems both tragic and inexorable, the dark shadow of quixotic nature, culled forward in multiple drama in King's brooding image.

Dennis Kowalski is a subversive of the very highest order and in the finest sense of the word. His assemblages mix media and pictorial elements into a kind of pensive and magical stew that can seduce acquiescence and conjoin belief. Whether Kowalski's target is rampant militarism, or political posturing, or racism, or machismo, his aim is perfect, aided by his openness to irony and poetic resonance. His ruminations have an authority in their accretion; the disparate elements he adheres together expand and inform each other into some rebus we seek to complete. This orchestration, this measured control of often unwieldy data is Kowalski's mask of revelation.

There may be no such thing as kinetic painting, but the work of Susan Sensemann can be seen to place its possibilities before us. Her vibrant and seething surfaces seem the residue of active forces, the legacy of churning interplay between elements of energy that are mystically transformed. In her latest paintings, Sensemann does not evoke the moody architectural spaces that constituted her earlier work. Here instead are pictorial regions that are simultaneously abstract and palpable, charged zones of intense turmoil that play out episodes of anxious impulse. Sensemann's paintings almost circumscribe chaos, and therein render a nether zone of great wonder and yet greater command.

Tony Tasset's immaculate objects test, and probe, and undercut, and enshrine, and defuse, and exhaust, and exalt. They are remarkably wise and witty send-ups of modern sculpture, particularly minimalist sculpture, and modify their source's already significant marketable objecthood by becoming even more pristine and purchasable, by getting ultra-chic through subtle, but extremely intelligent and enhancing, alterations. Tasset refuses to parody; his assault is in its subversion. His art and art world sources are mimicked, but it is a mimicry that expands possibilities, creating simulations that seem more multileveled than their sources. Tasset elevates to conquer.

There is a kind of bravado and bluster in the sculptures of Charles Wilson, and this sets in motion the tension of attempting to resolve seemingly irreconcilable languages. His images seem to evoke nostalgic responses that enshrine the possibilities of heroism. They summon memories of moments when crucial global demarcations were more clearly perceived, when our collective politics unambiguously told us what was right and wrong, and our technology allowed an individual to effect change, to take action against a sea of troubles. That those options seem less possible today—that they may never have existed at all—gives their summoning here a mock poignancy, functioning as Wilson's prod of our Pavlovian political nature.